

Nathaniel E. Trent

About 70,000 words

[Address] [State] [Zip]

[Email]

[Phone]

SMOKE SEASON

by

Nathaniel E. Trent

Chapter One

Joshua Grey

The sky was a sad, darkened gray-red color that seemed to weigh heavily on the land around it. To the north, as we walked, we all saw the city in all its glory with its skyscrapers and towers and homes. The earth around it was a dead and decaying landscape that served as a reminder of what happened years ago. There was no life, no grass, just dry and cracked dirt and blackened highways and old, broken-down cars that dotted the deserted desert roads.

The closer we moved toward the city, the larger it became. “We’re almost there,” my brother announced to the group. I looked around at us all; we were all slumped over with our travel packs heavy on our backs. My brother, my twin, led us. He had to keep optimistic to be a leader, but his saddened blue eyes and scraggly beard betrayed his tone. I could have been a happier candidate due to my newly shaven face and bright eyes. Orion walked beside me to the left with his auburn hair and fair skin. Jerome was to my right with his tanned skin and short, brown hair. Ahead was Orion’s brother, Arthur. He had his long blond hair tied back in a ponytail down his back.

“Put your helmets on,” my brother reminded us as the city began to spring up around us. We all took our cow skull headdresses from our travel packs and put them on over our heads.

The city was dead. The skyscrapers and buildings were deteriorated and broken with their shadowed windows and cracked edifices. “Welcome,” my brother announced, “to the City of the Dead.” The city here was a large, uninhabited zone that acted as the last landmark until we reached the canyon as we came from the south. This was my first time traveling outside of the canyon and, hopefully, my last.

“It’s a shithole,” Jerome remarked. I nodded in agreement.

“Keep your head down and move fast,” I said, looking warily to my left and right past my companions and into the buildings. There was no light in them, only shadowy rooms of blackness that harbored danger. We were always to be vigilant and on-guard here. There was no telling what could come from the darkness.

“You know, there’s rumors of mutants here,” Orion told us. I forced a smile, but being amongst the rubble and broken down buildings made me uncomfortable. I shifted in my boots. “Story goes, they lurk in the darkness of the buildings and when the sun sets they come out to play.”

I’d heard the stories before. I’d heard what the mutants were; morphed by the bombs, they said. They scared me all the same as a child as they did now, but I never thought I’d actually go through the City of the Dead. Back then, it was just a rumor. Now it was a reality.

“Shut up, Ry,” Arthur said from in front of us. “We all know those stories aren’t true.”

“Erin says they are!” Orion shouted at him.

Jerome laughed beside me. “I never believed them,” he bragged. “What about you, Grey?”

I almost answered, but then I reminded myself that he was directing his question to my brother.

“I used to,” Darin answered. He was walking in a hearty way with his hands on the straps of his pack, leading the group. He reminded me of a kid from the books on their first day of school with a gait full of swagger and confidence. “I’ve been here a couple times. Haven’t seen

one, but you can't see the damn sun with all these clouds."

"Oh, don't worry," Orion emitted a maniacal chuckle. "It'll set soon, and we'll see who's right then, won't we?"

"Whatever you say, Ry," Arthur sighed.

We dug our way deeper into the city. Past all of the smaller buildings and downtown, where they were tallest and the most windows were broken. Old cars cluttered the road and made it difficult to move about. We had to climb over the rusted shells and crawl through doorways and over torn leather seats. When we came to an old tanker truck, the stack long rusted away and open for anything to climb into, Darin stopped.

"You guys go first," he told us and held back a rusted sheet of metal for us to climb over. "Make it quick."

Arthur climbed over it first, then Jerome, then Orion. I went last and my brother came behind me and held the metal sheet back himself. Before I could put my foot on the other side, a clamor and a cry came from behind me—"Shit!"

I spun to face Darin, who held his leg to his chest. There was a large cut across his calf and it bled down his leg and soaked his cloth pants. "What's happened?" I asked, crawling over to his side. He pressed his hand onto the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Shit—I, uh, the metal sheet came down on my leg when I crawled across. It cut me bad."

I put my finger through a hole on my shirt sleeve and tore it down, pulling the piece of cloth off. "Move your hand," I told him. He obliged and blood gushed out of the cut. It was deep;

I didn't know if it could be sewn shut. I took the cloth and tied it tightly around his leg to prevent further blood loss. "Now here, can you walk?" I helped him out of the stack and onto the concrete, but his leg gave out from under him. I had to hold him up as the other three watched.

"Jerome, can you help me? We need to get him through here, we can't slow down."

"Yeah, man." He nodded and came to my brother's side. I slung Darin's arm over my shoulder as Jerome did the same and we began to make our way down the street again.

"I'll lead," Arthur said and he walked in front of us. He grabbed his rifle and held it tight as we walked, as if he sensed some kind of danger. We walked along for a while. We had to frequently detour around cars and through alleys due to my brother's lack of mobility. It was going to take us twice as long to get back to the canyon with him like this, and even longer to get back to camp.

We came to a large, collapsed building that blocked the roadway. The ground around it was cracked and overturned, as if in a crater, with the steel supports of the building and office supplies scattered across the road. There were old desks and papers strewn about.

"How are we supposed to get around this?" Orion asked. He walked very slowly as he approached the building. We stood there for a moment, watching as the clouds listed across the sky in a slow motion and the redness enveloped the city with such intensity that I had to squint to see over the debris.

"This way," Arthur said as he stood at the entrance to an alley. We went that way, moving slowly into the darkness of the city behind all of its buildings and into a labyrinth of brick walls and locked gates.

As we crossed over a sewer grate, there was a hiss in the distance.

“What was that?” Orion asked. We all stopped dead in our tracks and turned to look behind us, but there was nothing. A plume of vapor rose from the grate, twisting and curling in the air, and dissipated at its tip.

“Just go,” I grunted and pushed onward with Darin who still hung off of Jerome and me. Not long after we set off again, there was another hiss. This time it was closer; it echoed down the alley and bounced off of the brick walls.

“Okay, now I *know* I heard that,” Orion said and stopped. He took his rifle in his hand and pointed it down the alley. He called, “Whoever you are, you better show yourself before I hunt your ass down and shoot you.”

There was no reply. Slowly, we moved along through the alleyway and into the street. It wasn't until we reached the inner city once more that we saw what it really was. There was another hiss from the alleyway, closer than ever before, and we all spun around to see what it was. At first, there was nothing, but a figure came running on all fours out of the darkness. It was a malformed humanoid, naked without hair or clothes. It was skinny and one could easily see its bones and joints under its saggy skin. Its eyes were dark, black marbles that I could see my reflection in from as far as we were.

It opened its mouth, revealing a set of razor sharp teeth and let out a high-pitched, bone-chilling hiss that made everyone flinch.

“Run!” Orion yelled and pushed us along. Jerome and I spun around with Darin between us and we struggled to make our way across the street and down another alley behind Arthur. Orion fired a shot behind us and the monstrosity hissed once more, but this time in a low guttural

way that reverberated through the alley.

We came to a dead-end that spilled out between three buildings and a gate that was padlocked. “Shit!” Arthur cursed and threw his bag down. “Get back—get back! Open that gate, get back!”

Jerome and I carried Darin to a corner, where we set him down on the ground. I turned and pulled my rifle to an aim. I shook from the adrenaline coursing through me and I had to steady my aim so I could catch the thing in my sights. The beast was rushing fast down the alleyway at us it ran on all fours, and I pulled the trigger. The gunshot erupted out into the air and my bullet hit the mutant and sent him backward. The mutant convulsed, writhed, and shriveled then turned over on his side.

Orion called out and screamed, and then he cheered with joy. “Whoa! What was that, anyway?”

Arthur and I walked up by his side, feet away from the creature, and we watched it as its arms and legs bent and the beast balled itself up.

“What do you think it was? It was a mutant,” Arthur told him.

So they weren’t just stories after all.

“We should go,” Arthur said and turned around. There was another hiss, and then a second, and I felt myself freeze. There were more of them. We almost didn’t take care of one, how could we handle two or more?

Jerome broke open the lock on the gate behind us. “Come on!” he called. “Grab Darin and run!”

I rushed over to my twin's side. I grabbed under his arm, pulled him up, and slung the limb over my shoulder. I carried him as he hung off of me a few feet toward the gate, but I was interrupted by a loud gunshot. It echoed across the grayscale sky and Darin grunted. I felt him grow heavy as he put all of his weight on me, but I didn't stop. I'd had my practice carrying dead weight from carting game back to camp. This was nothing in comparison to an ox or donkey.

Arthur and Orion pushed us through the gate, falling in behind, and Jerome swung it shut. He padlocked the chain back around the links as soon as the mutants arrived. They both looked like the other one, hairless and skinny with a greenish tint to their skin. They clutched the links of the fence, hissed loud, and began to batter it. We'd caged them in. Thank the gods they couldn't climb.

A voice came from behind me, "Darin, are you okay?"

I turned my head to look at my brother, who was now deathly pale. He had his hand on his side and his eyes closed; blood pooled around his hand; it dripped onto the ground and stained his cotton shirt. Arthur fired two shots into the mutants as I lowered him down to the ground.

"It's a bullet wound," I said and moved his hand. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. How could this have happened? Who would shoot him? We didn't have any supplies or medicines to care for him. He was fading fast. "What are we going to do?" I asked, sobbing now. I took his hand in mine as I looked at his wound. I tore another piece of cloth from the blanket on my travel bag and wrapped it around Darin's waist, tying it tight, but he was already gone. His eyes were closed and his lips folded into a tight line. His cold skin was paler than ever before, so pale that I could see the blue veins under his eyes and cheeks.

I slammed my fist onto the ground, crying out. Who could have done this?

“We need to go,” Arthur put his hand on my shoulder. I was crying, but I nodded and stood. I raised Darin’s body up and slung him over my back so I was hunched over. We set off through the city. It wasn’t much farther until we reached the canyon.

Chapter Two

Sequoia

Never did I know that Joshua Grey had a twin. In the year that he and I shared together, not once did he mention his brother. Then he tried to have me killed. It was all coming together now; he never loved me, he just wanted to use me. I watched as he and his men put on their helmets, aiming the rifle back and forth between the leader—Joshua, I thought it was, because he had scruff on his chin and Joshua never shaved—and the twin in the back. I didn't know his name, but he had a clean face. Something Joshua always lacked.

“Sequoia,” a voice boomed behind me. “What do you think you're doing?” I looked up from the scope at my brother, Lupis. He towered over me, as I was on my stomach, and looked down. “You're not supposed to be fighting,” he told me, then he held out his hand. “Give me the gun.”

“Why not?” I asked, pushing myself to a stand I had no choice but to offer up his rifle.

He took it. “Dad said that you're not coming here to shoot. You're here to ward off the mutants. He doesn't want a gun in your hands.”

“Does he gotta know?” I asked with a sly smile. I knew what my dad thought; he only let me come along because I protested, but he didn't want to. He didn't want me to go because I was a woman—not only that, but his daughter. Mom died with a gun in her hands, he didn't want the same to happen to me.

Lupis had a hard voice, “No, but I'll know. I don't want to be the one getting in trouble. Now come on, Corvo is over there scouting the area. We need you to make sure there aren't any

mutants.”

I sighed and he pushed me along. We made our way across the roofs of the buildings, over the city and on top of ruined skyscrapers. We followed the band of Boneheads to a tanker truck, where we watched them all climb over until Joshua, as he climbed over last in line, the metal sheet he pulled back fell suddenly and dug into his leg. He called out and scurried into the stack, out of sight. He had to walk with support after that.

“Can I shoot him?” I asked in a nervous whisper to Lupis. Corvo gave me a disapproving look from the front of the line.

“No—we aren’t even supposed to kill them. We’re supposed to watch them, that’s what dad wants. That’s why we came down here.” I grunted. After what Joshua Grey did to me, he needed to die. He did not deserve to live after trying to have me killed.

We walked on, following the group until they could go no further on the main road. They entered an alley we couldn’t get to. “Where are they going?” I asked, leaning forward to get a last look at them. “They’re going to get trapped that way.”

“We can go up and around,” Corvo suggested. “It won’t take long; we can move across a derailed el-train over there onto their side, where they’ll come out. Follow me.”

We made our way across the rooftops, over a fallen building, and inside another. It was dark and dank, heavy with dust and stagnate air. We strolled through the darkness and climbed out a window on the other side of the building, then up a fire escape to the rooftops again. There, we made our way onto the tracks of an elevated train and across the street, right above the exit of the alley in which they were. There was a hiss across the air, and we looked down.

“Thanks for being here, Sequoia,” Corvo laughed. “The mutants will get them instead. Lucky strike, I guess.”

They made their way out of the alley, but a mutant followed them. They ran across the street into another alley, so we followed on the tracks and across the rooftops to the dead-end in which they trapped themselves. Joshua’s brother helped him to a corner, set him down, and then turned and aimed his rifle. The man fired once and hit the mutant in the head, stopping it. They took a minute to examine its writhing body before they went to continue out of the city, but there were two more consecutive hisses nearby. They were anxious.

Joshua’s brother picked him up and the two started to move across the concrete to the now open gate. I only had one more chance, then they’d be in an inaccessible part of town. I took my brother’s rifle in my hand and looked through the scope. I took the first shot I had, hitting Joshua in the side. I’m sure the gods would be happy with this.

“Sequoia!” my brother’s voice was a quiet shout. He tore the rifle from my hands, sliding it away across the tracks. “What are you doing? They could have seen us!”

He forced me to lie low for a moment, as the men went through the open gate and shut it on the mutants. They locked it and one man shot the two mutants. “We have to go,” Corvo said and stood. “I know the way, just follow me.”